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THOMAS A'BECKET.

A HISTORICAL DRAMA.

IN THREE ACTS.



BY PAUL BLECKLEY.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA.
ECONOMICAL BOOK AND JOB PRINTING HOUSE,
V. P. SISSON & CO., PROPRIETORS.

1873.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

Readers of these pages will probably become enough interested in the writer, to make the following information concerning him acceptable.

He was born in Atlanta, November 14th, 1859.

In his eighth year he read some of the plays of Shakspeare, beginning with Macbeth. Before he was eleven he had read them all except one, and knew several so accurately, that on hearing any extract from them, even if no more than a line or two, he could instantly refer it to the proper play, act and scene, and name the character speaking, the one addressed, and all others present on the occasion. All the acts, scenes, and characters in Macbeth, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Richard III, Henry IV, and perhaps some others, were so familiar to him that he could specify the several entrances and exits, in due order, from beginning to end.

Many of these details have, by degrees, disengaged themselves from his memory; but he still retains a striking command over the general sense and substance of Shakspeare.

He has studied the works of no other dramatist, as a whole, but has read, first and last, with more or less attention, quite a number of miscellaneous plays.

He has witnessed some good acting, but not very much, never having visited a theatre elsewhere than in Atlanta. He saw Forrest four nights; next to whom, the best representatives of dramatic art known to him, are Buchanan, Barrett, Jefferson, Janauschek, Mrs. Bowers, and Charlotte Thompson.

He reads with average relish, but is no book worm. In the ordinary sports and past-times of children he takes a free and fresh delight; and evinces, at all times, a healthy repugnance to severe mental labor. Learning and wisdom are less attractive to him than ball and marbles. Indeed, he is, as befits his age, a child.

L. E. BLECKLEY.

November 10th, 1873.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

HENRY II, King of England.

THOMAS A' BECKET, Archbishop of Canterbury.

ARCHBISHOP OF YORK.

REGINALD FITZ URSE,	} Norman Barons. Followers of King Henry, and Murderers of A'Becket.
WILLIAM DE TRACI,	
RICHARD LEBRITO,	
HUGH DE MORVILLE,	

EDWARD GRIM, Cross Bearer.

PAGE.

BISHOPS, MONKS, LORDS, REVELLERS, and ATTENDANTS.

SCENE.—Sometimes in England;
Sometimes in France.

THOMAS A'BECKET.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—*France. Within the Abbey of Columbe. An Antechamber.*

Enter REGINALD FITZ URSE, RICHARD LEBRITO, HUGH DE MORVILLE *and* WILLIAM DE TRACI, *ushered in by a Page.*

F' Urse. Didst tell the Archbishop we were in waiting for him?

Page. Ay, sir.

de Traci. And may we see him now?

Page. By the next clock.

Le Brito. We are Ambassadors from England:—Go, boy, and tell him so.

Page. Sir, I will. [*Exit.*]

de Morville. What course shall we pursue to move to condescension or bow the neck of this stern man?—which of the two, or force or gentleness?

F' Urse. What, in the name of Heaven, means't thou by gentleness! Expectest thou, then, to see this haughty prelate fondle thee and pet thee without the help of fear?

Le Brito.—Force, by all means.

de Traci. Not so hasty. Do ye think fear to have a seat in the heart of a man whom, it is but too plain, all England cannot conquer? Ye know him to be a priest; he pretends to worship God—the only just and great God,—but never believe

there are not other gods who share, in him, an equal place with the Almighty. The first, (Haughtiness) Kings only should adore; the second (Ambition), befits not any priest; the third, too godlike to be confounded with the others, is true Patriotism: at this point only is he weak, for he indeed does love his country; and for England's sake he may go back to England. Peace! here he comes.

Enter THOMAS A'BECKET.

Becket. Sirs, hearing that you did await my presence, I do present myself to know your pleasures.

de Morville. Most holy father, we come as suppliants in England's cause.

F' Urse. Suppliants! What, heard you that? He said suppliants; upon my life, he did! (*Aside to de Traci.*)

de Traci. (*Aside to F' Urse.*) Peace! good countryman; 'tis for the best.

de Morville. Begging in my and thy King's name—

Becket. My King! The holy Church, sir, owns no King save the Pontiff Alexander. Back, then, to those that sent thee, and say so.

de Morville.—That your Grace return to England and resume your greatness once again.

Becket. Thomas A'Becket is greater here than elsewhere. There's no King here to lord o'er and limit the churches' privilege. Here, one may humbly worship God, and that is all I ask. Greatness I ask not. Here I have freedom; in England there is tyranny.

F' Urse. (*Aside to de Traci.*) Oh, God! Shall we allow him to talk thus--abuse our King and country, and that before our very faces?

de Traci. Keep you quiet, Reginald, while I speak. (*Advancing toward the Archbishop and kneeling.*) Reverend Sir, let Traci, on his knee, persuade thee come to England.

Becket. This place befits one better who has been banished from country, home, and friends for seven long years.

de Traci. O, good father—

Becket. Good ! Good ! That came not from thy heart, and I hate flatterers.

de Traci. O, Sir, would'st come for Henry's sake ?

Becket. No, not for Henry's : 'twas he that banished me.

de Traci. Then, sir, for mine.

Becket. I scarcely know thee.

de Traci. Well, then, for England's, come.

Becket. Sweet England ! [*Pauses in meditation.*] Although o'ershadowed thou art with tyranny, yet, for thy dear, dear sake, will Becket come unto thee. Sirs, bear my best greeting, and, although he hath erred, my blessing, also, unto Henry, and tell him for the sake of England I will come. [*Exit.*]

F' Urse. (*To de Morville, who has been whispering to, and trying to quiet him.*) Peace ! I can bear no more. (*He draws and rushes after Becket, but is stopped by the others.*)

de Traci. Stop, madman, for the love of Heaven ! What would'st thou do ?

F' Urse. (*Struggling.*) Teach that saucy monk his place.

All. Come away with us.

(*Reginald suffers himself to be led off reluctantly. He casts uneasy glances at the door through which Becket has passed. Exeunt.*)

SCENE II.—*England. Flourish of trumpets. KING HENRY seated on his Throne in a magnificent Hall of Audience. Lords, Courtiers and Attendants.*

King Henry. What of the Lords to whom we did entrust our high commission to the Archbishop : have they yet returned ?

First Lord. They do await thy summons to attend thee, good my Liege.

King Henry. Call them in. [*Exit Lord.*]

[*Re-enter LORD with FITZ URSE, DE TRACI, DE MORVILLE, and LE BRITO.* O, welcome home, my Lords. [*They kneel.*]

de Traci. May Heaven's blessing light upon our gracious Sovereign's head ! We have done that which we were sent to

do, and hope our Liege will not be disappointed when we say we were successful.

King Henry. Ha! he will come?

de Traci. Ay, my Liege, directly.

King Henry. Leave me, Lords: we'll meet again to-morrow, and due reward shall be given for this important service. [*Exeunt Lords.*] I now need no attendance. Leave me; I would be alone. [*Exeunt, all but King Henry.*]

What must be done? The Archbishop's returning here to England will stir a rebellion 'mongst the people.—If I attempt to govern the Church he will oppose me.—If he oppose me, he is guilty of high treason, and should die for it.—He will not yield to the law.—One part of the people crying for his blood, the other defending every hair upon his head.—Thence angry division and widespread rebellion. O, would to Heaven that he had not returned! I sent for him publickly that he might refuse, his answer be made public, and, so, quiet the people who clamor for his return. He must not reach the kingdom. He must die. But, how? The hand of some assassin. Where can the assassin be found? In the person of Reginald Fitz Urse. He is a bold and desperate knight, and bears A'Becket hard, and loves me. It may be that he will deal the saving blow. Yes, thus must he perish. [*Going—Turning back.*] Soft! This course will be too bloody, too desperate, for a King to take. What shall I do? Let me see! Let me see!! I have it. I'll meet him ere he reaches London, and, putting off all show of fear, force him to swear to certain conditions which I will, myself, dictate.

Becket refuse not, nor be too high,

For if thou dost, then, shalt thou surely die.

[*Exit.*]

SCENE III.—*Fields in the Country, near the Highway.*

Enter THOMAS A'BECKET, *speaking off as he enters.*

Becket. Lead my horse along the road. I, for a league or so, will walk through the fields. Meet me at the turn of the lane; I will be there before thee.

Nature seems to have put on her most beauteous look to welcome me to England. Would that the men would look so happy at the sight of me. But what said the Lords who did entreat my presence here again? "Come for England's sake." Why England's if not for the sake of her people? What's England without her people? Nothing. Yes, *my* country. And what's my country without my countrymen? Why, nothing. Then, coming for England's sake, I come for the sake of the English people. If for them I come, why should I fear them? Why, 'tis a groundless fear and shall be banished. What! Do my eyes deceive me? 'Tis the King! Now, Becket, summon all thy courage up, and let thy haughty spirit permit thee not to bend a knee before him.

Enter KING HENRY and *Train.*

King Henry. I bow me to the minister of God, begging thy blessing, and offering my humble thanks for thy return to England.

Becket. What! Shall the Archbishop of Canterbury bless a second time one who is under a sentence of excommunication? Prove thyself worthy for it to be removed, and then sue for my blessing.

King Henry. My lord Archbishop, we ourself, Henry, lawful King of England, come not here to sue, as we at first thought fit to say, for any old priest's blessing. We come not to bring thee with pomp and rejoicing to our Capital, but to find how absence hath altered thy haughty spirit, and to know whether to reckon thee now 'mongst friends or foes. Answer me:—

Art thou, as formerly, a disloyal traitor, or a loyal subject to Henry, King of England.

Becket. Neither. I am no traitor to my country, nor do I own a King save the King of Kings—the Prince of the Church, the Holy Pope of Rome.

King Henry. Archbishop, thy haughty neck must, for this once, bow to our sovereign will. Read this and sign it, or thy head and lands shall pay the forfeit of thy disobedience. But if thou signs't, thou shalt surely then remain unmolested in our realm. Therefore, sign, and swear to bide the same in all the time to come.

Becket. (Reading.) First, the excommunication from the head of King Henry shall be removed: Secondly, the excommunication from all the loyal Bishops shall be taken off: Thirdly, all monks and priests who commit any crime shall be surrendered for punishment, according to the Constitutions of Clarendon, without reservation.

The loss of honor shall never buy life for the primate of all England.

King Henry. Then shall thy priests' heads keep company with thine. London shall see them roll in the dust.

Becket. (Aside.) Becket would willingly die to save his name from such dishonor. But the monks, alas! For the sake of the Church the degrading terms must be accepted.

King Henry. Thine answer, Lord Archbishop,—yea, or nay?

Becket. Henry, now mark me, and remember, too, that not for my own sake, but theirs whose lives are threatened by thy barbarous use of power, do I consent to sign.

King Henry. (To an attendant.) Bring the pen. [*The pen is presented, and Becket signs.*] Now, come A'Becket, lets away toward London.

Becket. No. Go thou on, and I will follow.

King Henry. Well, Becket, now thou art reasonable and mild; we'll meet in London and be reconciled.

[*Exeunt King Henry and Train.*]

Becket. Never, in my soul; though for the sake of the

Church and England, perhaps, my outward self may play the traitor to my inward feelings.

Henry, Thomas A'Becket, once again in power, will show his true soul, much unto thy cost. [Exit.

ACT II.

SCENE I. *Canterberry. A Room in the Archbishop's Palace.*

A'BECKET AND EDWARD GRIM.

Becket. Nay, Edward, urge me not. To the Constitutions of Clarendon I never will submit. Is't not better, striking a final stroke, to die, than to drag out a miserable existence in disgrace? Must the Saxon lion be subdued, and trampled upon, by the ignoble Normans? Shall I suffer them to say, the Saxon slave has at last submitted to his masters? Heard I such words from a base Norman's lips, priest though I am, I'd strike him to my feet, though 'twere the King himself. I swore to observe the laws which at Clarendon were made. It was a wicked oath, but have I not atoned for it? Did I not suffer self-inflicted penance till the Holy Pope granted me absolution? To-day I hold the usual evening vespers, but no usual vespers will I celebrate. No, such a spectacle has not been witnessed for ages as shall this day be seen. The people shall behold me excommunicate Bishops by scores. All that adhere to Henry shall be cursed. Besides, I'll write to him—tell him his constitutions are accepted only on the condition, *Salvo honore Dei*. He shall hear that I am not the base poltroon he thinks me, to be conquered by so much breath as was expended in the vain threat, "Thine and thy priests heads shall be forfeited." *I will* be triumphant; not all the Kings in Christendom shall hinder.

Grim. My Lord, I pray thee, take not this rash step. Consider but his power.

Becket. Base churl, think'st thou I fear him ?

Grim. No, my Lord, but—

Becket. Thou knowest my heart—knowest there's no measure I'd not take to thwart King Henry and to free the Church. Why should'st restrain me, knowing as thou dost, that by thus acting I win fame for both myself and thee. Grim, there is one secret I have kept from thee I would fain have thee know. My object in the early part of life, was to become what I now am ; and that secured, I now must triumph or must die a martyr. Think on't, Grim, a glorious Saxon martyr, or else a glorious victor !

Who are these that come ?

[*Enter Monks and Bishops : the latter kneel at the foot of the Archbishop's chair; the former, directly behind them.*]

My ever faithful friends and servants, what would you have ?

An old Bishop. Most gracious, holy, good, and noble Lord, it is a boon we ask.

Becket. It needs no naming ere 'tis granted.

Bishop. It is, my Lord, that the condition, "*Salvo honore Dei*" be not spoke on when the Constitutions of Clarendon are named to the King. For ourselves we ask not, but for thy own sake request, my Lord, that thou wilt heed our prayer.

Becket. In all things else ye shall command me. As for this, my answer is, that I never will be guilty of surrendering the Church's rights unto a tyrant. [*Bell rings.*] Hark ! the Cathedral bells announce the hour for vespers. Come—come, and let's to worship. [*Exit.*]

Grim. There's no checking him. The King will fall into a rage when he hears this, and I fear to think what it may end in. [*Exeunt.*]

SCENE II.—*Normandy—the city of Rouen. A Banqueting Hall in King Henry's Palace. KING HENRY seated on a Throne. FITZ URSE, LeBRITO, DE MORVILLE, DE TRACI, Lords, Revellers, Attendants, &c.*

Several Bishops enter, and kneel at the foot of the Throne.

King Henry. Rise. If from your brows your hearts be judged, the news you bear is any thing but pleasant.

Archbishop of York. My Lord, we come bearing disgrace along with us. Thou behold'st not Bishops invested with their rights of office, but excommunicated, yea, cursed and ruined men; by act of him, the wily Saxon, whom thou did'st appoint above thy gentle Norman followers. He, on his return, did tell the people he had come to die among them, and swore he would not consent to the Constitutions of Clarendon without the reservation he so oft has named. Besides all this, he hinted that your majesty intended he should be murdered. Even now he hath confederates all over the country who are striving to rouse the Saxon churls against the Norman nobility. My Lord, must it be said that Normans did permit this? Shall a Saxon prelate drive out the Norman churchmen from the Kingdom, revile the King in terms which it were blasphemy but to repeat, and, to crown all, stir up the people to a base rebellion?

King Henry. So? Truly a sagacious plan! He signs unconditionally, and remains quiet whilst we remain in England. No sooner, however, do we set foot in Normandy than, like a volcano he bursts out again to do more mischief. Leave me now awhile; your griefs shall be remembered.

[Exeunt Bishops.]

By the Light of Day! I'll not be crossed thus by this rascal priest. I'll make him answer for it. Alas! I know not what I say. Unhappy am I, though a King. If pomp were happiness, then would I have it to its full extent. My train, for number, can not be surpassed by all of Europe, but, alas! there is a lack soul. Of all my numerous train there is not one would rid me of that shaveling.

de Traci. My Lord, is't, then, your will—

King Henry. My followers have no spirit; therefore, my will is nought.

F' Urse. (*Aside to de Traci.*) Come, man, I see thou art thy country's—eh?

de Traci. Ay, in soul, and not without spirit; for though the King but now lamented in us their want, he shall find that I have both. [Exeunt *de Traci* and *Fitz Urse*.

de Morville. (*Aside to LeBrito.*) See'st not they lead?—then we must follow. [Exeunt *LeBrito* and *de Morville*.

King Henry. (*Aside.*) Thank Heaven, they're gone! (*Aloud.*) My Lords, I thank you for your presence here to-night. Sorry I am that we were interrupted. But now 'tis late; we would fain rest ourself; and so, Good night to all.

[Exeunt all but *King Henry*.

Becket, beware! There was no good boded thee by the stern glances which those fierce Barons interchanged when they abruptly quit my presence. So I would have had it. Yet, I tremble for the consequences which this rash act may bring about. The Pope must be appeased. But how? After the Lords who rode away so hastily I'll send a messenger saying, I fear me they did not construe me rightly. When he arrives at the port of Calais they will have sailed for England. On his return, another shall be dispatched with orders to follow them across the sea. When he on English soil does stand, their deed will then be some days old. The Pope's wrath turns not upon me but them, and I no blame incur. Thus I will reap a harvest from an act which will my eager agents ruin. [Exit.

ACT III.

SCENE I. *Canterberry. A Room in the Archbishop's Palace. A'BECKET, GRIM, and other monks attending.*

Becket. He said there was danger—said he would have had me fly from Canterbury ere yesternight set in?

Grim. Ay, my Lord, so said he.

I have a presentiment of ill which sits most heavily upon my heart. O, be not angry, gentle sir; for thee alone I fear.

Becket. Then thou fearest for one who fears not for himself.

Some one approaches! In each face I read that which would free me from this life of bondage! O, that this fatal day were at an end, and that I might rest in peace!!

[*Enter FITZ URZ, DE TRACI, DE MORVILLE, and LE BRITO. With folded arms they stand and stare at the Archbishop.*]

What would ye have?

F' Urse. The loyal Bishops freed from the sentence of excommunication which thou didst impose upon them; and thee to answer for thy offences to the King. Deny us at thy peril; we come not unprepared.

Becket. The power of the Church is above the King. Is it for such as ye to threaten me? If every sword in England were pointed toward my heart, e'en then I would not yield.

F' Urse. Then, we'll do more than threaten. Priests, in safety keep him until we return, or ye shall suffer with him. Comrades come.

[*Exeunt Barons.*]

Becket. (*Calling after them.*) What! Think ye I would fly! And from you!! Here, here, here, shall ye find me!!!

These are the hands, but Henry is the heart; these, the instruments—Henry's the mind that will direct their blows.

Grim. O, my good Lord, fly through the secret passage to the Church. There, in that sacred refuge, thou mayest abide in safety.

Becket. I fear them not, and therefore will not fly. [*Voices heard singing in the distance.*] My brother monks I hear singing the evensong. For that, and for no reason else, will I go, my duty, at such time, binding me to join them. [*Exit.*]

Grim. Go, you,—make fast the gate; I'll after him. 'Tis meet we keep them out, though 'tis against his will.

[*Exeunt. Noise of beating at the gate outside. Then enter FITZ URSE, DE TRACI, DE MORVILLE, and LE BRITO, armed.*]

F^r Urse. The villain monks have shut the gate and hid him somewhere. Had we not found the window in the garden wall, then we had hacked till night upon the gate ere we could force an entrance.

de Traci. I hear the monks singing in the Cathedral. 'Tis not unlikely he may be there among them. Come, then, and let's go in.

SCENE II.—*The interior of Canterbury Cathedral. Almost dark. A light from a small door on the left throws a gleam on the Altar. The singing of the monks has been continued since it commenced. It ceases as the scene changes.*

A'BECKET and Monks are discovered, GRIM bearing the Cross before the Archbishop, who stands on the dark part of the stage.

Grim. Permit us, at the least, to bar the door, that there they may not enter; for, by their hasty approach, methinks they will respect nor shrine nor holy image.

Becket. No, Grim, it is no fortress, but the house of God, under whose roof we stand.

Enter FITZ URSE through door on left.

F^r Urse. [*Speaking as he enters.*] Follow me, loyal servants of the King.

[*Enter DE TRACI, DE MORVILLE, and LE BRITO. Exeunt in haste all the Monks, except GRIM, crying, Fly! Fly! Help! Murder! &c.*]

Where is the traitor? [*A pause.*]

de Traci. Where is the Archbishop?

Becket. [*Coming out of the gloom.*] I am here.

de Traci. Thou hast destroyed the peace of the King, our royal master. Either fly the Kingdom, or come with us and answer to him for all that thou hast done.

Becket. No! Never! Nor will I stir one foot from where I stand though I be murdered.

F' Urse. Away with him! We may not kill him here. [*He tries to force the Archbishop away, who clings to the altar rails.*]

Becket. Coward!—Villain!—Dog! Thus to assault a priest! Were I the good knight which in times past I have been, and wore the sword which I was wont to wear, I'd teach thee, villain, how to use me thus!

F' Urse. Say'st thou so? Then die! [*Strikes at his head.*]

Grim. I'm the first victim to this work of Hell. [*Throws himself between them; receives the blow, and dies.*]

Becket. Thrice noble Grim! Thou showest thyself better by thy death than e'er in all thy life thou did'st appear. [*Leaning over him.*] Take thou my blessing ere I do depart this life to join thee!

de Traci. Hold, Reginald! Do but consider. He's at the very altar!

F' Urse. [*Striking him with the flat of his sword.*] Fly, priest, fly!

Becket. Nay. Here or nowhere shall ye murder me!

Le Brito. [*Strikes him on the head with a mace. He falls to his knees.*]

Becket. Father! into Thy keeping I commend my spirit!! [*His hands are clasped; his eyes turn upward with a steadfast gaze; he is stabbed by the others; falls and dies.*]

All. Thus perish all the foes to the gentle Normans.

F' Urse. So may the Normans reign, and Saxon dogs no longer know such greatness. [*Exeunt.*]

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